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Civilizing the Wilderness  
Martin Grove United Church  
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8

I love Advent. I suppose I love Advent for lots of reasons, but one reason is that we seem to be constantly face-to-face with contradictory images during Advent. We have the contradiction between the image of Jesus being born in a humble stable with the reality that Canadians will collectively spend an estimated \$ 63 Billion on Christmas this year. We have the contradiction between singing about Jesus as a baby who “no crying did make” with the amount of racket and celebration that we ourselves will be making over Christmas. But one of my favourite contradictions in Advent is from the image in Isaiah, where we are told that God will come in the wilderness, but also, that we should level out the hills and make the paths straight - by civilizing that wilderness. Are we called to go to the wilderness? Or are we called to civilize the wilderness? We can't really do both!

That contrast between civilization and wilderness comes out in our images of John the Baptizer too. From Mark, we read that John was a man from God, but a man from God who lived in the wilderness and lived a wild life himself. “Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey”. But if John's disciples really accepted him as a man of God in spite of his wild nature, why does the author of Mark bother to mention that John was a wild man? Why didn't the author simply state that John was a man from God? Because in spite of being seen as a man of God, John was still looked down on for being wild. Because even when we try to embrace the wilderness, we try to civilize and control it at the same time.

I mean, wilderness is fine, right, as long as I can charge my phone and get good Internet service. Wilderness is fine if I don't have to sleep in a tent or get cold, or wet. In other words, wilderness is fine as long as we control it. But Wilderness, which should probably be pronounced “wilder-ness” is never about us being in control.

The famous Canadian singer / song writer Joni Mitchell wrote a song along those

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lines, called “Big Yellow Taxi”. The most famous line from that song is, “They paved paradise, and put up a parking lot”. That line is an almost exact reflection of an experience she had herself in Hawaii. In her own words, Joni Mitchell said, “I wrote 'Big Yellow Taxi' on my first trip to Hawaii. I took a taxi to the hotel and when I woke up the next morning, I threw back the curtains and saw these beautiful green mountains in the distance. Then, I looked down and there was a parking lot as far as the eye could see, and it broke my heart... this blight on paradise. That's when I sat down and wrote the song.”

Actually, the text that we read from Mark has also been “civilized”. In our reading today from the New Revised Standard version of the Bible, it was stated without comment that the Old Testament quotation was taken from Isaiah. Which is fascinating, because the quotation in Mark 1:2 is not from Isaiah, but rather, from Malachi 3:1. Mark 1:3 continues with a quote from Isaiah 40:3.

So - what's going on here and why should we even care? Well, biblical scholars - for the most part - seem to agree on how this came to be. The earliest written versions of Mark credited the quotation to Isaiah. Remember, the Bible was not assembled into anything resembling its current form until hundreds of years after Jesus. And before the printing press and computers, copies of the Bible were made by hand by monks. And these monks knew the biblical texts very well. The monks would have known that the reference in Mark did not come from Isaiah. Scholars believe that at some point when Mark was being copied, the monk who was doing the copy simply decided to “fix” the reference by writing “in the prophets” in place of “in Isaiah”. The monk was only making a logical “fix” to the text. That’s why King James has the phrase “the prophets” in Mark. But when Greek New Testament scrolls were discovered that were found to be more original than the scrolls that were used for the translation of the King James Bible, scholars realized that the more original texts said, “in Isaiah”. So, modern biblical translations use “in Isaiah” even though it's incorrect.

OK – that covers what happened in the past. But perhaps I have to work a bit harder to convince you that you should care about this minor, obscure, point. Why do we care today? Well, I care because it is just one more example of how we - as humans - inherently prefer simple, logical stories to actual reality. We like the controlled, the

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managed, the civilized. We don't like the wild. We are even inclined "fix" the Bible rather than to simply let it tell its own story. It's just human nature. For all that John the Baptizer was wild, and for all that Jesus spent time alone in the wilderness - we humans don't like the wilderness! And we don't like it because we can't control it.

I went on a spiritual retreat recently. I knew I needed to find some wilderness. If I could have snapped my fingers and been transported to the scene on the bulletin cover - the nice wetland surrounded by Black Spruce trees, I probably would have gone there. But as I thought about it, I came to realize that finding wilderness is pretty easy, even in the city. The key to finding wilderness is simply to not be in control. So I knew I had to get on a bus. I mean, in my own car, I'm in control. I pick my route, my music, the temperature. I decide when to wash the windows, when to pull over for coffee. I'm in control. On a city bus however, you don't know when the bus is coming, you can't decide who will sit beside you, you can't usually decide in advance if you will get a seat or have to stand. You can't control the temperature. You can't control the racket coming from the headphones of the person beside you. You can't control the smell of the person beside you. 1 TTC token is all it takes to find some wilderness. And you can ride all day!

I actually was not that random on this particular retreat. I had decided to take the bus to Pearson Airport, and to spend the day simply being present. Taking in the environment, the sounds, the smells, the emotions. The intensity and the vacuum of space. Being ... well, just being. It was a wonderful retreat. Wilderness can be anywhere.

So on one hand - the call to go to the wilderness that we read from Isaiah and from Mark makes sense to us. Perhaps the call to the wilderness is like a spiritual time out. It's a call to not be in control for awhile - to making the personal time and personal space we need in order to engage with the spirit in deep, meaningful, and unpredictable ways. It's a call to find space to be away from normal distractions. It's a call to see God more clearly. It's a call to see our own selves more clearly.

On the other hand what's all this about building highways, smoothing out the terrain, making rough places smooth? If the whole point of going into the wilderness is

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to find the time and the space for solitude - why build a highway? Are we supposed to invite people into the wilderness with us? How many people could we invite to join us before the wilderness became a lot less wild anyway?

According to some sources, the idea of making a clear path was a common demand - for a king. In particular, for a warring, conquering king, who - upon his victory - was expected to ride into town in triumph, and on a smooth road. I suppose it's hard to look like a victorious ruler if your head is bopping around like one of those dogs you see in the back of cars.

But is that the right image of Jesus for us - a conquering king? Well, maybe. But in Mark, the image we see of John the Baptizer hardly fits that description. John may be a prophet, but he is not the sort of person that would demand smooth paths. I get the sense that John would in fact delight in the crooked, the narrow, the rough. He would be more than happy to situate himself at the end of a long, twisted path, so that those who chose to visit him would have to endure challenging conditions to reach him. That would help ensure that those people coming for baptism were at least humble. John was a hermit living at the end of a dirt path - if there even was a path. He was not royalty. He was not like a Wizard you might find at the end of a yellow brick road.

The highway that leads to John is not fancy, but I believe it is a two-way road. A road that connects people from different backgrounds, and the two-way nature of the road enables cultural mixing, sharing, and new life. What John brings - or at least what John points to - does not come from the centre of society - it doesn't come from the religious centres, the social centres, or the educational centres. Instead, it comes from the margins - the unknown and the unknowable, the unsanctified, the uncomfortable, the uncontrolled, and the uncontrollable. From - in fact - the wilderness. John points to the wild.

This is the first Sunday in Advent. And as we begin our Advent journey, let us all remember - first of all - that Advent is a journey. I'm sure we are all tempted to think we know where the journey will end - with the coming of Jesus (or Santa, depending on your theology). But if you already know where the journey is leading, are you truly open to being on the journey at all? Are you truly open to finding unexpected blessings along the

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way?

This year, I encourage all of us to begin our Advent journey without expectations, without any sense of being in control. With open minds and open hearts. And start your journey with only one thing - a deep longing in your heart. What is it that you long for this Christmas? I don't mean a present you might find under a tree. I mean a longing inside you that is so deep that you perhaps pretend it doesn't exist. What do *you* need to find healing, wholeness, peace. Spend some time in the wilderness - wherever you find it - and give yourself permission to really long for what you need. And during the journey of Advent, be open to finding it.

Our journey has begun. Happy trails to us all.

*Amen.*